
BOOK REVIEW

Undoing the Demos

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This review charts the substantive theoretical import, diagnostic utility, as well as the conceptual and stylistic limits of Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos*. Brown adamantly charts the destructive effects of contemporary neoliberalism, construed largely as an insidious form of rationality rather than simply an economic system, and the hollowing out of democratic political life which has ensued from its ascension. The account of neoliberalism supplied by *Undoing the Demos* presents an indispensable tool with which to forge modalities of both analysis and resistance yet also contains important limitations which circumscribe some of the book's utility and gesture toward the need for critical supplement.

Keywords: Neoliberalism; Resistance; Homo Economicus; Democracy

Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Zone Books, 2015. Paperback. 296 pp. ISBN: 9781935408543. \$18.95.

Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* presents a lucid guide to the undertheorized political implications of the neoliberal phenomenon. While neoliberalism has been heavily theorized and fervently analyzed, Brown's book stands out for its theoretical depth, cogent analysis, and philosophical substance with laudable level of accessibility. Brown deploys a critical Foucauldian framework to articulate a sustained conception of neoliberalism primarily as a political rationality. This is a departure from a popular tendency to view neoliberalism as merely a set of economic policies. As an ancillary feature, Brown's focus on rationality also enables a scholarly guide to the work of Michel Foucault in addition to outlining her distinctly political analysis of neoliberalism. *Undoing the Demos* stands out as a unique and substantive text, although some of Brown's conceptual and stylistic choices constrain her project in certain ways as well.

Undoing the Demos evaluates neoliberalism across several distinct yet related arenas, such as legal reason, educational institutions, and foreign policy. Yet Brown impressively retains a sharp focus on democratic concerns while analyzing a notoriously diffuse, expansive, and contested issue. This tight focus coheres around Brown's emphasis on the fact that neoliberalism is notably characterized as a governing rationality which grafts economic logics onto previously non-economic arenas.¹ This tendency presents unique and dangerous threats to political life and for democratic possibilities. Extending from its

drive to disseminate market values and economic logic, neoliberalism "assaults the principles, practices, cultures, subjects, and institutions of democracy – understood as rule by the people."² Brown explicitly avoids assigning democracy a particular formulation or genre and instead preserves only the general implications of a norm of self-rule by the people.³ While some may reasonably find this point of ambiguity to be a detraction, Brown's intention is to cast a wider analysis in demonstrating that neoliberalism threatens *many* conceivable varieties of actually existing democracies and also works to imperil democracy as a form of political imagination writ large. This move makes sense for Brown's scope, but still leaves lingering quite a bit of practical specification and formulative work for democracy to be compellingly revitalized or mobilized against neoliberalism.

Brown attempts to avoid romanticizing her defense of democracy and remains attuned to the historical shortcomings of extant liberal democracies. Nevertheless, she adamantly maintains that without them, more ambitious or radical projects would likely be foreclosed as well.⁴ While Brown offers a compelling case, it likely remains an open question as to whether liberal democracy is actually required in order to launch more ambitious political projects. Possible alternative platforms for radical political imaginaries, such as Anarchist or Marxian frameworks, are not really explored by Brown, which could have conceivably presented a wider range for potential sites and tactics of resistance. Regardless, Brown offers a compelling articulation of the dangerous encroachment and "hollowing out"⁵ which neoliberal rationality advances upon political life, broadly construed.

It is also necessary to note that Brown's work is not meant as a political manifesto or a resistance guide,⁶ but rather is intended to provide diagnostic work. Brown observes fundamental shifts in subjecthood and rationality which normatively transform citizens into human capital and incentivize them to behave as individual firms.⁷ This move constitutes a departure from classical liberalism's constellation of self-interested actors harmonized by exchange; competition, under neoliberal reasoning, has in fact replaced exchange outright for Brown.⁸ This subtle shift marks one of the moments in which Brown's description of neoliberalism diverges from other accounts which might conceive of neoliberalism as a mere extension of liberalism, and is where Brown follows Foucault in identifying points of both rupture and continuity with previous modalities of capitalism.⁹

Brown's critical engagement with and elucidation of Foucault's work animates much of the book's early-to-middle chapters and, in turn, supplies some of the book's key concepts. Brown draws most explicitly on Foucauldian notions of political rationality and governance, respectively, in the articulation of neoliberalism as something other than mere ideology. The focus on rationality and governance also sustain Brown's aversion to reducing neoliberalism to a bundle of policies. As she puts it: "even if many neoliberal economic policies were abandoned or augmented, this would not abate the undermining of democracy through the normative economization of political life and usurpation of homo politicus by homo economicus."¹⁰ Brown's sense of urgency and consistent focus shines through above. However, those looking for a detailed or historical sense of how neoliberal policy formations and the dissemination of governing rationality materially assemble will likely need to seek out additional sources.

Brown channels Foucault's non-Marxian account of the emergence of neoliberalism (which Foucault charts as early as the 1950's and not as a reaction to economic crises in the 1970's and onward)¹¹ fairly straightforwardly into an extended discussion of neoliberalism as political rationality and governmentality.¹² The sections on Foucault provide great secondary resources for scholars. However, certain elements of Brown's marshalling of Foucault's work might seem abstract and potentially difficult to follow for those unfamiliar with Foucault's primary texts. Brown herself emphasizes that her reconstruction is no substitute for primary reading.¹³ Later chapters apply the principles in more concrete analysis which greatly aid in providing further clarity, although perhaps a more applied emphasis earlier on might have facilitated easier accessibility. A particularly compelling exemplar of helpful case analysis occurs as Brown applies Foucauldian rationality and governance paradigms in recounting the implementation of agricultural "best practices" in Iraq following 2003 invasion.¹⁴

A considerable worry for Brown is the shift in neoliberalism from politics to management, which threatens the contested and often conflicting deliberations of democratic life and renders power less visible.¹⁵ As Brown states: "governance disseminates a depoliticizing epistemology,

ontology, and set of practices. Soft, inclusive, and technical in orientation, governance buries contestable norms and structural striations (such as class), as well as the norms and exclusions circulated by its procedures and decisions."¹⁶ It is worth noting that Brown's own analysis presents textures which sometimes border on homogeneity (i.e., the Demos as a monolith) with regard to social identity markers, such as class, race, and so on (although she sprinkles gestures towards these things throughout and includes a brief section on the gender of *homo economicus*).¹⁷ This sensibility comes as a result of the units and registers of analysis, which most coherently follow from Brown's engagement with the macro-phenomena of democracy, neoliberalism, orders of reasoning and the like, yet still likely demarcates a limit for certain readers and interests.

Brown aptly notes the limits of Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism, noting an "underdeveloped"¹⁸ quality to the theoretical terrain of political rationalities and even governmentality as they relate to neoliberalism. For Brown, Foucault's major contribution lies in his prescient vision of neoliberalism as more than economic policy, yet her work carries Foucault's insights beyond the limits of his analytic perspective (for example, his restricted view of the political within spaces of sovereignty and juridical spheres,¹⁹ or neglect of capital)²⁰ as well as updating them for the contemporary era. These musings provide a helpful insight into Brown's own methodology and serve as instructive guidance for critique. Brown assembles Foucault's conceptual work toward her own normative defense of democracy in ways which would be precluded by his well-known aversion toward prescriptive analysis. For instance, Brown notes that Foucault's theorization furnishes no notion of "citizens,"²¹ which a theory of thick democratic sensibilities seems to require.

The second half of the text further extends Foucault's (modified) sensibilities in an application to contemporary events primarily in United States politics and education. Brown's analysis of the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision offers a novel reading of the now infamous case, viewing it as a shining example of the familiar "signature"²² tendency of neoliberal rationality to recast a formerly noneconomic space under market logic. Brown underscores that the problem with *Citizens* emanates from its political implications and not merely the further intrusion of capital or corporations into politics. Put differently, for Brown, the issue is not that corporations were extended individual rights per se, but rather that this move constitutes corporations as participants in popular sovereignty that carry enhanced capacities to articulate speech by way of capital.²³ This unique focus highlights an underdiscussed feature of the infamous case, but perhaps underplays the modeling import of *Citizens'* effect on legal personhood (which carries important implications outside of Brown's project, for instance with abortion debates, etc.) One may also wonder if Brown overstates the effect of the *Citizens* decision vis-à-vis the macro-transformative developments in legal reason writ large which she decries. At the very least, Brown does

not demonstrate, as fully as possible, how the decision itself reflects or causally inflicts the more generalized, large scale subversion of liberal democracy which she tracks.

The penultimate chapter, "Educating Human Capital" goes further with regard to demonstrating how neoliberal rationality remakes subjects into self-investment-driven human capital which subsequently undermines democratic citizenship. Again, this neoliberal articulation of homo economicus is demonstrated to be much more constraining than the interest-seeking subject of classical liberalism.²⁴ Education plays a crucial role in supplying the techniques for self-investment and continual self-improvement (in the sense of efficiency or instrumental rationality rather than something like human flourishing) and neoliberal pedagogy reframes knowledge as solely a means toward capital enhancement.²⁵

As Brown describes these contemporary threats to democratic education, she also bemoans the manner in which deep liberal arts education paradigms have been jettisoned or reworked in favor of market rationality which, again, is eviscerating the cultivation of an educated citizenry.²⁶ On Brown's reading, the post-WWII extension of higher education (and liberal arts pedagogy) to a wider base was a radical democratic event²⁷ which, even in its failure to adequately extend *actual* equality to all (particularly along race and class lines), still carried an articulation of egalitarian ideals.²⁸ In musing over the question of whether the post-war spread of education to the masses really bolstered democracy, Brown affirms that evidence of this claim might derive from the flourishing of significant popular political movements, such as the civil rights movement, feminism, and challenges to inequality.²⁹ This illustration helps underscore the distinctly political stakes involved and sustains Brown's urgent timbre.

While there is no doubt that popular education aids crucially in the formation of a democratic society, it does seem that Brown engages in a bit of romanticized nostalgia as she recalls the golden age of higher education. The most prominent narratives of the civil rights movement often succumb to a well-known tendency to overemphasize the charismatic leadership of figures like Martin Luther King Jr., while obfuscating the grassroots organizing (often done by working class women who did not or were not able to pursue formal and/or higher education) which bolstered the movements. The same can be noted for feminism and other egalitarian popular movements, such as the Black Panthers. While there may be some danger in a potential (mis)reading of Brown's commentary as purporting that social change happens *exclusively* through educated vanguard classes, her point is well taken that educational models which privilege "return on investment"³⁰ and devalue teaching³¹ constitute deep threats to the cultivation of a democratic citizenry. A broader account of contemporary education inequality would also add a certain instructive nuance to an analysis of education under neoliberalism, although Brown's focus pertains more so to higher education.

Brown elaborates, extends, but always sustains her central concern that neoliberalism is transforming political life under an image of economization. To this end, we need a new

order of political and social reasoning³² and while Brown's book is not intended to offer resistance alternatives, at the very least it should impute a sense of sober urgency. She offers a lucid defense of democracy, while acknowledging deep historical flaws and limits, as a platform for critique with the capacity to limit otherwise destructive power.³³ For Brown, the stakes are clear and quite severe: the economization of democracy (as an imaginary) could actually kill it.³⁴ Brown closes *Undoing the Demos* with the serious enunciation that the political work of those who might resist neoliberalism requires offering alternatives to capitalism, rupturing neoliberal reason, and countering despair and nihilism as well. Brown denotes: "our work on all three fronts is incalculably difficult, bears no immediate reward, and carries no guarantee or success. Yet what, apart from this work, could afford the slightest hope for a just, sustainable, and habitable future?"³⁵

One might wonder if Brown's compelling narrative is too totalizing or too dark in places. Bonnie Honig raises this suspicion as she critiques Brown's account as one which, past merely restricting its scope to a diagnostic or descriptive order, makes it difficult to even conceive of viable resistance at all.³⁶ For Honig, Brown too quickly dismisses or ignores resistance to neoliberalism and particularly fails at accounting for their possibility. On Honig's reading, Brown thinks that we have "*only* homo economicus to guide us"³⁷ and thus the concluding pages of *Undoing the Demos* constitute at best a "slight hope."³⁸ These are viable critiques which must be taken seriously. Earlier in her first chapter, Brown references the "potential bareness"³⁹ of a democracy which is both in danger and in need of energy, care, and desire on the part of citizens. Brown's timbre may sound dire and close to totalization. However, it seems plausible that Brown retains a sense of urgency precisely because alternative possibilities still exist. Otherwise there would seemingly be nothing to be urgent about and no coherence in imploring the revitalization of democratic practice within a demobilized citizenry.

This notion is undergirded by some of Brown's qualifications, such as: "alertness to neoliberalism's inconstancy and plasticity cautions against identifying its current iteration as its essential and global truth and against making the story I am telling a teleological one, a dark chapter in a steady march toward end times."⁴⁰ Passages like this would need to be swiftly ignored in order to render Brown's work as merely a nihilistic lamentation of a finalized neoliberal victory over everything. Yet Honig's critiques sit in complementary tension, particularly in the book's gloomier sections of prose. Brown's timbre is appropriately grim, yet does not seem to fully evacuate the possibilities for resistance (which again, lay outside the scope of *Undoing the Demos*).

Brown's emphasis on the serious consequences of contemporary neoliberal rationality seems to overstate the extent to which democracy previously served as guiding egalitarian norm, even as she consciously retains a sense of the uneven application of the American democratic experiment and its liberatory promises. Brown enduringly defends flawed

democracy for its capacity to carry forward egalitarian ideas, even as they were often radically divorced from its practices. This position is legitimate and resonates well within Brown's broader argument. However, it is hard to ignore the legacy of brutality which made western democracy possible.

For instance, Brown denotes that higher education never quite realized a universal extension to the masses at large, but still offers a beautiful egalitarian vision. Thinking through the racialized slave labor which built many of American academia's pristine buildings upon territory soaked in indigenous blood perhaps disrupts some of the rosiness imparted by Brown's description. This supplement does not undo her central arguments, but it does trouble a certain tendency in literature on both neoliberalism and democratic theory to gloss over historical particularities rooted in racialization. Brown touches on issues of race a few times throughout the book, but this too lies largely outside of her scope. Given this, a further exploration of how race and neoliberalism interact within and around Brown's schemas might provide a fuller understanding of neoliberal subjectivity. Lester Spence's *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics* fills in certain gaps that might exist for critical race theorists interested in neoliberalism, such as his attention to neoliberal implications for education, such as charter schools in urban and non-college settings.⁴¹ Spence's work harmonizes well with Brown's thesis on a withered public life and the ongoing modeling of subjecthood into human capital. Scholars such as Randall Kennedy and Michelle Alexander's critical race legal theory also provide supplemental work on the intersections between law and neoliberal capitalism in the contemporary era.

Similarly, Brown's centering of political events and forces within and among the United States and Europe does not offer much perspective on neoliberalism in the rest of the world. This would seemingly be a fair observation. However, Brown is likely correct to focus most centrally on the places where neoliberalism holds pertinent historical origins and contemporary centers of power. Nonetheless, a more global analysis would offer a useful supplement. A similar observation might also denote that an ecological perspective on neoliberalism would require the supplement from outside of Brown's text. All books cannot do all things. However, *Undoing the Demos* constitutes a potent analytical framework for thinking through neoliberalism's undertheorized political dangers and offers a first step in understanding and resisting its power.

Notes

- ¹ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2015), 19.
- ² *Ibid.*, 9.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹² *Ibid.*, 116.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

²² *Ibid.*, 155.

²³ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

³² *Ibid.*, 202.

³³ *Ibid.*, 208.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

³⁶ Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 19–20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁹ Brown. *Undoing the Demos*, 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴¹ Lester Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2015), 85.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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